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The Quest for Knowledge

According to a tradition, the Prophet of Islam once remarked: "The remedy for ignorance is asking questions." If the ignorant man does not inquire, his ignorance will stay with him. But if he has a questioning mind, some knowledgeable person will answer him, and he will no longer remain ignorant.

There is a saying in Arabic to the same effect: To know that you do not know is half knowledge itself. If an ignorant person is not aware of his ignorance, he will continue to remain in the same state. But when he becomes aware of his ignorance, he sets about seeking for knowledge. He will try to turn his ignorance into knowledge. In this way his awareness of his ignorance will become the stepping stone leading towards full knowledge.

This is called, in present-day parlance, the spirit of inquiry, and is given great importance. It is this spirit of inquiry which has played the greatest role in bringing about the age of science. It is the zeal to discover which has led man to knowledge.

In ancient times the phenomena of nature were considered to be manifestations of God. The sight of the manifestations of nature, therefore, aroused in man the spirit of worship. It was only when these natural phenomena were divested of their divinity that the spirit of inquiry could be aroused in man. As a result, many of the mysteries of nature now lie unravelled.

An inquisitive mind is a *sine qua non* for the acquisition of knowledge. Only those who are possessed of this quality will achieve great success in intellectual and academic fields. Those devoid of this spirit will remain static, and will fail to climb to the top of the ladder of success.

It is this spirit which is the foundation of all scientific progress.

Humans, or Animals?

Gandhiji started his campaign of service to his countrymen in the city of Ahmedabad. It is one of history's great ironies that as his centenary was being celebrated all over the country in 1969, that very same city became the scene of communal riots.

Shree Bishambhar Nath Pandey, an MP and an eminent historian, commented on these shocking events in an article entitled, 'Traditions of National Integration in India' (published in the Journal of the Khuda Bakhsh Library, Patna, and read out in Lucknow on the occasion of the Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad Memorial Lecture in 1986):

In 1969 this state was not under central rule, but under the rule of the regional party. Miscreants went on the rampage, looting and burning shops and houses, killing innocent people. It seemed as if this city, long associated with Gandhi's selfless devotion, had bade good-bye to humanity. The then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, said to me, "Many delegates have gone to the city to bring reports, but I am not satisfied with their report. I would like you to visit the city and see for yourself whether humanity still survives there in the midst of animality."

I left for Ahmedabad and stayed there for about one month. I visited hospitals to see the injured. I consoled people who told me heart-rending tales of destruction of their property. About six thousand houses had been burnt. According to the government report 350 people, (but according to the military intelligence about 2000 people) had lost their lives in this communal riot. The majority of the casualties belonged to the minority community. One day I was patrolling past Memobai Chal, and about 150 people gathered around me as I reached there. All the houses of that locality had been burnt to ashes. From some of them smoke was still coming out. I asked them, "Brothers, did all the homes belong to Muslims?" A person aged about 40-45 said, "No, there were 35 Muslim houses and 120 Hindu houses in this Chal." Then I asked him his name. He told me that his name was Kalyan Singh. Then I asked again: "Does that mean that first a Muslim mob came here and burned all the Hindu houses and then a Hindu mob came here and burnt all the Muslim houses?" He said, "No, only a mob of Hindus had come here." Then I was all the more astonished, "Then does that mean the Hindus had burnt Hindu homes?" Kalyan Singh replied in the affirmative. Then I asked which was his house. He pointed to his house, which was still smouldering. He told me also that this was his shop as well as his house. "I used to make tyres for motors and cycles. That is why it is still smouldering." Then I asked him, "Kalyan Singh, what would have been its cost?" He replied, "The house was valued about one lakh and the shop too." My astonishment went on increasing. "Then why on earth did the Hindus burn the Hindu houses?"

Kalyan Singh said, "The mob came and asked us to tell them which houses belonged to Hindus and which belonged to Muslims, as they wanted to bum only Muslim houses. We refused to comply. They

got enraged. They inquired from others. Others too refused to do so. Then they shouted, 'Then we will burn all the houses!' We replied, 'Do as you want.' Then they sprinkled petrol on the houses and set all of them on fire. Only when the fire had engulfed all the houses did they leave the place.'

I asked, "Kalyan Singh, why did you allow your two-lakh worth of property to be burnt to ashes? Perhaps it was your lifetime's savings? Why did you not tell them you were a Hindu."

Kalyan Singh introduced me to some Muslims standing there saying, "We are both from the same village in Sikar, Rajasthan. First we Hindus came here and settled and did good business. Then we invited our Muslim neighbours to follow us and earn their livelihood in the city. They trusted us and followed us. They were good craftsmen. Soon they succeeded in their business and established their shops and houses. Now, those who have been our acquaintances for hundreds of years, who belong to the same village, who came here on trust, whom we call uncle, how could we allow their houses to be burnt? How could we have shown our faces to the Lord above?"

I was so moved, I could not control myself. I said, "Kalyan Singh so long as people like you survive in India, no one can shake the foundations of mutual love and unity in this country."

Human Nature

Whatever Kalyan Singh did was at the dictates of his own nature. Everyone is born with an upright nature, and everyone is initially under its influence. But when a man is provoked, the uprightness of his nature is then submerged and his animal instincts come to the surface. That is why all incidents of barbarism take place only when man has been constrained by provocation to deviate from his inborn nature.

So long as you avoid provoking the other person, he remains a human being. But no sooner do you provoke him than that very same person will descend to the level of animals. Now his nature has been derailed. A train that derails will not only destroy itself, but will cause destruction to others as well.

Awaken human nature in others. Let the animal nature remain dormant. This is the only certain formula for a harmonious social existence.

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Speaking with caution

In the Battle of Siffin in 657 AD, Muslims fought Muslims. When 'Umar ibn 'Abdul Aziz was asked if those who died in this battle would be among the damned or the saved, he replied: "God has kept my hand from their blood. May my tongue never be stained by it." (*Jami' Bayan al-'Ilm*)

(191:10)

A Matter of Wisdom

The Prophet Ayyub (Job) described in the Qur'an in brief, and in the Bible in detail, was born several hundred years before Jesus Christ in the plains stretching from Syria to Palestine. In the Bible, his place of birth is called Uz.

According to the Bible he possessed seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred she-asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east.

After some time, such misfortunes befell him as left him impoverished yet Job was the epitome of patience. In the words of the Bible, "...Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped. And said, 'Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return to thither: the Lord gave, and Lord hath taken; blessed be the name of the Lord'." (Job 1:20-21)

Then again the circumstances changed after some years. Job again came to possess all kinds of wealth and resources, even (more than he had before. According to Bible, "The Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand sheasses." (Job 42: 12)

The Qur'an ended the tale with "We restored to him his people and as many more with them: a blessing from Ourselves and an admonition to prudent men." (38:43)

Although given very brief mention in the Qur'an, this incident makes the very important and lesson-giving point that one should never despair when afflicted by misfortune or loss in life. God, being All-merciful, has devised the system of this world in such a way that here no loss or deprivation is final. Here, one can always overcome one's misfortunes and be the gainer once again, provided one remains patient and perseveres in one's struggles, never losing hope of God's succour.

The Recognition of Truth

When the Prophet first brought God's message to the people, there were many who opposed him. He told them the truth, but they said, "It is witchcraft." They also asked, "Why was this Qur'an not revealed to some great man of the two towns?" (43:31) God answered them thus: Is it they who apportion your Lord's blessings? It is We Who apportion to them their livelihoods in this world, exalting some in rank above others, so that the one may take the other into his service. Better is your Lord's mercy than all their hoarded treasures. (43:31-32)

The "two towns," Mecca and Taif, were central cities in ancient Arabia, where certain citizens like Walid ibn Mughirah and Utbah ibn Rabia in Mecca and Urwah ibn Masood and Ibn Abd Yalayl in Taif, enjoyed the status of acknowledged leaders (*akabirs*). They were held in high esteem and were looked up to by the people for guidance. That is why when "Muhammad ibn Abdullah" claimed to be the Prophet, people failed to understand how that could be possible, when he was not one of the acknowledged leaders.

The truth is generally accepted when projected as such by some established and influential personality. But acknowledgement of the truth – and here is the greatest test for man – is valid only when the truth recommends itself by virtue of its own merit; when it is perceptible as such without the say-so of men of fame and status.

To be able to perceive the truth for what it is one of the most important tests set for man by his Maker. That is why this ever-recurring test will confront man till Judgement Day itself: Those who consistently measure up to it will succeed: Those who do not will fail.

To accept the truth on the basis of its visible grandeur is to judge by mere externals. Such an acknowledgement is valueless in the eyes of God. The true believer is one who accepts God's reality before any visible signs appear to support it.

This world is a world of trial, in which God appears only to those who have the ability to penetrate the divine disguise.

(185:4)

Savouring One's Faith

Imam Muslim bin Al-Hajjaj, the compiler of the collection of the Traditions known as the *Sahih Muslim* was born at Naishapur, AH 204 and died AH 261. His book of traditions ranks as second in authority to the *Sahih Bukhari*.

One tradition has been recorded by him in the chapter called, *Kitab al-Iman*. The hadith is as follows:

Abbas ibn Abd Al-Muttalib heard the messenger of God say: "The essence of faith is savoured by the man who has agreed to accept Allah as his Lord, Islam as his religion and Muhammad, may peace be upon him, as the Messenger of Allah."

Faith is not something which can be savoured by all, for it entails the sacrifice of the ego. And that is the most difficult thing for modern man to do, when egoism is the most powerful feeling he has. Humanism too, in changing the focus from God to man, has given the human ego a disturbing new dimension.

To become a true believer, the postulant must acknowledge inner and outer realities, and the only way to do this is to surrender his ego. He must agree to accept the role of creature for himself and that of Creator for his Lord. He must acknowledge the prophethood of God's Prophet and must accept a lesser position for himself. He must agree to give God's religion its rightful place and give up any ambition he may have had of fashioning his own religion.

This is possible only after a revolution in thinking. Only then does the seeker after truth have a full realization of God. If it were not so, he would not be prepared for so great a sacrifice.

(223:11)

After a period of eighty two years

In the science of light there is a law of nature called refraction. Today this is known as Snell's law, having been discovered initially by Willebrord Van Roijen Snell. He made his discovery in 1617, but this discovery remained unknown to people, lying unpublished, until a Dutch scientist, Christian Huygens, came to know of it and mentioned it in his research paper in 1703. Only then did the world come to know of Snell's discovery.

That is, Snell's scientific discovery remained hidden from the eyes of the world for a period of 82 years. It was only after this long period, when Christian Huygens highlighted it, that the world came to know of its importance.

The matter of the Hereafter too is somewhat similar. How many of God's servants are there who are sincerely engaged in virtuous activities, away from the limelight, unknown to people, unheralded in the press? How many God-fearing people are there whose inner selves are shaken with the fear of God, but whose undemonstrative expressions fail to show this inner tempest. There are God-fearing people who keep their mouths closed for fear of God, yet no other human being is aware of this virtuous act on the part of the true believer. How many pious souls are there who have had every opportunity to display their ego and torment others, but who have been halted in their tracks by the fear of God's chastisement.

There are many true believers whose good actions have been lost in the wilderness, recognized neither by near ones nor by more distant people. But this state of affairs will not last forever. On Doomsday God will unravel all veils. Then all things hidden from view will appear as clear as daylight. This will be the Day of Judgement when no action done in the world will remain hidden. Even a tiny good deed done in the world will appear as plain as daylight, and all virtuous men will be rewarded for their good deeds, whatsoever they may have been.

(224:6)

The Necessity of Observing Silence

The Prophet of Islam once observed "One who believes in God and the Last Day should either speak words of goodness or keep quiet."

It is true that failure to speak up and tell the truth when the occasion calls for it can (according to a hadith) earn one the name of 'dumb Satan.' But, there are many occasions when observing silence is more proper and more important.

One example of how essential it is to observe silence is provided by an incident at the battle of Uhud in which the Prophet injured in battle, had fallen down in a cave, away from the eyes of the people. His enemies proclaimed that he had been killed, and confusion prevailed among the Companions.

In the meantime, a companion of the Prophet caught sight of him and exclaimed, 'Here is the Prophet.' At that moment the Prophet motioned to him to keep quiet (so that the enemy would remain ignorant of his being alive).

Another instance is the hadith which says that asking the assembly to keep quiet while the Imam is giving a sermon is an absurd act. (That would amount to making noise.)

Observing silence at individual meetings too is a good principle to follow, but when the matter pertains to the whole community it assumes an even greater importance. At a delicate moment the observance of silence by a leader can check a riot from taking place. While an ill-timed speech by a leader can lead to a full scale riot, leaving in its wake the loss of hundreds of innocent lives and property worth crores of rupees burnt to ashes. It is in this sense that sister Consolata has observed:

"The greatest number of failings in a community comes from breaking the rule of silence."

(223:20)

Waste of Opportunities

After India had been divided on the basis of the two-nation theory, a Muslim majority dominated the newly created Pakistan, majorityism becoming the rule in all the important spheres of Pakistani life.

This created problems for the Hindu minority, for it became almost impossible for them to live there if they wanted to maintain a high Hindu profile. But the Pakistani Hindus did not opt for the way of reaction. Instead, they made themselves completely inconspicuous, restricting their Hinduism entirely to their homes, and concentrating on the fields of commerce and education. In this way they silently engaged themselves in positive pursuits for a period of thirty years. Consequently, they have achieved a satisfactory social equilibrium in Pakistan. There, majorityism poses no real threat to them.

But the Indian scene is totally different. The Indian leaders, Gandhi and Nehru and others, did not attempt to emulate Pakistan on the score of majorityism. Instead, they established a secular system in the divided India. This system offered to Muslims those very opportunities which were not available to the Hindus in Pakistan. Where majorityism in Pakistan had separated the Hindus from the mainstream, the secular system in India afforded Muslims every opportunity to join the national life as equal members with the same status as the majority.

The introduction of the secular system did not, of course, mean that life in India was necessarily ideal. As part of a world which is a testing ground for everything and everyone, no system will be found flawless. Realising this, Muslim leaders played a most foolish part. Instead of emphasising the favourable aspects of secularism and playing down its unfavourable aspects, they chose to highlight whatever they found of a negative nature. They laid stress, not on opportunities, but on drawbacks. In this way, they seriously hindered the assimilation of Muslims into the Indian mainstream.

As a result, the Indian Muslims have fallen prey to frustration and irritation. Fifty years have been wasted. Had Muslims lived 'here as they live abroad, all their problems would have been satisfactorily solved by now.

(223:15)

Dare to Take Risks

Walter Wriston, former chairman of Citicorp, once observed, "Failure is not a crime. Failure to learn from failure is." When Jim Burke became the head of a new products division at Johnson & Johnson, one of his first projects was the development of a children's chest rub. The product failed miserably, and Burke expected that he would be fired. When he was called in to see the chairman of the board, however, he had a surprising reception. "Are you the one who just cost us all that money?" asked Robert Wood Johnson. "Well, I just want to congratulate you. If you are making mistakes, that means you are taking risks, and we won't grow unless you take risks."

One of the ever-present features of our present world is that no one knows for certain what factors will be conducive to the success of any venture. Given our human limitations, the only possible course is to take the initiative in spite of being unable to forecast the result. This is the risk factor.

No doubt there are apprehensions about taking risks. But in the present world nothing can be achieved without a certain amount of daring. As the proverb says, no risk no gain.

(224:5)

Devotion to the Qur'an

Imam Shafi'i (150-204 A.H.), founder of one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, enjoys a superior position not only in religious scholarship, but also as a pious and God-fearing man. According to Imam Ahmad ibn Hambal, founder of the Hambali school of jurisprudence, there was "no other person whose bond with Islam was as strong as that of Imam Shafi 'i."

He was hardly ten years old when he committed the whole of the Qur'an to memory. A full recitation would take him three days. So steeped was he in the Qur'an that he could invariably trace all matters of religious import to the relevant verses.

All the jurists of his day were in agreement that the consensus of the *ummah* (community) must be regarded as *hujjat* (the final authority). Anxious to establish consensus as an absolute source of Islamic law, Imam Shafi'i began reciting the Qur'an over and over again in order to identify a verse which would support this argument.

It is said that in his scrupulousness, he recited the entire Qur'an 301 times. Ultimately he was successful in discovering the portion of the scriptures which upheld consensus as *hujjah* (final authority). This happened one day when he was reciting the Qur'an. When he reached verse no. 115 in the fourth chapter, it was suddenly revealed to him that this verse sanctioned the *ijmah* (the unanimous consent of learned doctors) as a basic source of Islamic law. The verse reads:

He that disobeys the Messenger after Our guidance has been revealed to him and follows a path other than that of the faithful, shall be given what he has chosen. We will cast him into Hell, a dismal end (4: 115).

Imam Shafi'i concluded that the phrase 'path of the faithful' in this verse corresponded with the *ijmah* of the believers. The believers of the first phase attempted to find in the Qur'an the answer to every problem that arose, even if they had to go through it a hundred times. They did not rest content until they had discovered the relevant Qur'anic injunction. But, nowadays, the Qur'an is resorted to only for recitation and blessings.

(223:10)

Means of Communication

The telephone is one of the wondrous blessings of God. This wondrous invention converts spoken words into electrical waves, transmits them along a line and reconverts them into sound so true that there is often no need to ask who is at the other end.

Through the telephone it has become possible to contact people living in any part of the world. For instance, if you are in India and you want to speak to the President of the United States in Washington or the Queen of Britain in London, you have only to press the buttons of the following digits:

00-1- 202-456-1414

00-44-1-930-4832

and you will. immediately be connected with the office of the person concerned.

The first telephone was installed in the office of Charles Williams in Massachusetts on April 4, 1877. Today such telephones are installed in millions of homes all over the world. John Brooks in his book, 'Telephone: The First Hundred Years,' writes: "Man, instead of making himself heard a few hundred yards away with a shout, can make himself heard around the world with a whisper."

Telephones and all other such means of communication are blessings of God. They are there to be used for the communication of His message. But such blessings are used to the maximum for all purposes other than the communication of the divine message. What a strange example of the misuse of God's blessings!

(224: 16-20)

What is Mysticism

The concept of spiritualism or mysticism has existed in the world for thousands of years. It has many schools of thought, which must be dealt here, albeit briefly, in order that the Islamic concept of spiritualism can come out clearly vis-à-vis other schools of spiritualism.

Three basic concepts are worth mentioning here. According to the first concept, spiritualism means to establish contact with one's inner personality. To them man's inner existence is akin to a mysterious ocean, which remains, under normal circumstances, undiscovered for man. Like the iceberg in the oceans, a tiny part of his existence comes under the grip of his consciousness, while the greater part remains hidden under the subconscious. Now the goal of spiritualism is for man to be able to relate his conscious part to the unconscious. By accomplishing which man achieves the stage of mental or spiritual development. He perfects/completes his mental existence at the conscious level.

There is partial truth in this concept/theory. It is true that the potential of man's own existence is far more than that which comes under the perception of conscious in normal circumstances. However this is not the answer to man's actual quest. Taking both the conscious and the unconscious, man is no doubt a limited existence/creature, and discovering something limited in nature can never be the answer man seeks to find.

Man's quest, from the respect of actual reality is a quest of his own consummation/completion, rather than simply one concerning his own discovery. Man by his very nature cannot remain content with limitations. Man from every respect is a limited being. Now he wants to find the limitless in order to compensate for his limitations.

According to the above concept what is possible is only that the limited succeeds in finding the limited. This can never be the answer to man's actual quest, that is why such an answer leaves him unsatisfied as before.

This issue/matter is in principle a matter concerning the perception of reality, rather than simply a matter of discovering one's own self. If man were a perfect being he would never have the psychology of quest embedded within him. The psychology of quest is part of man's subconscious, so, if the subconscious is a perfect existence why should it always suffer from the psychology of quest. Such a psychology is indicative of imperfectness on the part of seeker.

It is a fact that had man been a perfect existence he would never have been born with the natural urge of quest. All human beings being born with this nature provide an internal proof that man in his nature is no perfect existence. This fact is enough to prove that the target of the spiritual quest of man can never be his own being.

The other concept of spiritualism is basically produced under the influence of the philosophy of monism. According to the concept of monism, leaving the details aside, all forms of existence are in actual fact manifestations of the same source. Man and everything besides man is one and the same thing in essence. The existing world is a manifestation of one and the same reality rather than of manifoldness of reality. A philosopher has explained this concept of oneness of reality in these words:

'The knower and the known are one. God and I, we are one in knowledge, and there is no distinction between us (12/787).

According to this concept of spiritualism, to put it in simple words, it is for the part to realize its whole in order that it may join it by discovering it.

This second concept of spiritualism is, academically, a baseless concept, yet in both, the philosophic and religious circles, this concept has remained popular. But no person or school of thought has provided sound/real argument in favour of this concept.

Calling this quest of spiritualism the quest of the part for the whole is not worth consideration in present circumstances. What has to be proved first of all in this connection is the fact that man is really in his nature a part of the whole. As long as this first premise is not proved, how can a philosophic interpretation based on this concept be true.

All the points made in favour of oneness of reality are only a set of words/an exercise in words. All the arguments forwarded in this connection are symbolic in nature. For instance, it is said that, "all the things of this world are varied (in different forms) manifestations of one absolute reality." This is only a statement and no such set of words can be a substitute for an argument.

Another symbolic argument forwarded is that if one drop is taken away from the ocean, that drop in its nature/essence will be a tiny ocean. Man is likewise a tiny drop of the vast sea of reality. This too is a simile and simile never proves a reality. A simile may be employed to explain a reality already established. But offering similes towards proving a reality is entirely unacademic and illogical.

To prove the theory that the "essence of everything is the same," one of two arguments are essential. Either such a theory is proved by a scientific research or else an argument in the real sense exists in its favour in revealed religions. But this theory is neither established by science, nor any real argument is to be found in its favour in revealed religions.

In such circumstances a school of thought which explains the spiritual quest in terms of all is the same (*hama ust*) undoubtedly stands on a baseless ground as no testimony, either of science or revelation exists to support this theory.

The spiritual quest means from the Islamic point of view that the servant (of God) wants to join/contact God, his Creator.

Islamic spiritualism is in actual fact a realization of God. Whatever man gains at the level of his heart and mind through the realization of God is known as Islamic spiritualism.

Here again Islamic spiritualism has come to have two schools of thought, one may be called Quranic school of thought and the other is commonly known as *tasawwuf*.

There are several branches and forms of *tasawwuf*. These varied forms can not be described in the form of a single principle. However, *tasawwuf*, is basically another name for two things-the concept of *shaikh* (spiritual mentor) to guide to the path of spirituality, and *muraqabat* (specified time of day or night devoted to private worship in addition to the five prescribed prayers), divine contemplation, recitation of different words and phrases repeatedly.

Both these two concepts/practices are total innovations in Islam as neither of these existed during the times of the Prophet and his Companions.

Holding *shaikh* to be a means/source of spiritual progress certainly amounts to incorporating *gurudom* in Islam. Islam in fact had come to negate this concept of *gurudom*. Since ancient times all religions had accorded the religious *gurus* the status of intermediaries between God and man. Islam put an end to this middle link and proclaimed that man can establish contact with God directly. That there is no need for an intermediary. But after three hundred years after the emergence of Islam, the pre Islamic concept came to be held sacred once again and thus found their entry into Islam. Any such concept is an obstacle to the path of spiritual progress instead of being conducive to it.

Similarly the entire body of *aurad-o-wadhaif* is innovation (*bid'a*) adopted by sufis of later times. A method not taught by the Prophet can never be a means of the realization of God.

All such new methods place obstacles to the realization of God, these can never be stepping stones to it. This is a fact that the prevalent methods of additional devotions are not established from the traditions of the Prophet.

Furthermore, all these are physical exercise/act and such physical exercises can never lead to spiritual progress. Physical action can produce physical results. It is impossible for a spiritual attribute to be produced from physical action.

From Islamic viewpoint man's existence has two aspects/ levels to it. One is man's visible body which is in need of a number of material things. Without providing the material things like food, water, clothes, home etc. physical body cannot survive. The other aspect of human personality is that in it there is an invisible being called soul. The soul too requires certain things, but these are not of material nature. These are entirely of non-material nature, hence its requirements too was to be fulfilled.

According to this division, since man possesses a double personality, two types of provision are to be constantly supplied for him to survive. One being physical provision, the other being spiritual provision. The centre of the acquisition of physical provision, according to the Qur'an, is this earth (14:32) and the

centre of the acquisition of spiritual provision is the Being of God. That is why this provision is called 'Lord's sustenance' (20: 131) or 'spiritual provision' is in actual fact, the result of a contact with the external source of sustenance (that is, God). This goal is achieved entirely through mental action. This mental activity is called *tazakkur* and *tafakkur* (remembrance of God, thoughts of God) in the Qur'an. When man takes his mind away from the external world to the internal world, when he diverts concentrates his attention from the material aspects of thing to their hidden reality then he is introduced to a whole new world. He experiences finer realities. This experience increases his realization and in this way provides him the sustenance for him to live a spiritual life.

Man is a creature who wants no boundaries, sticking to limits is akin to his intellectual death.

It is an indication of his deprivation from divine sustenance. It is because the intellectual journey of a recipient of spiritual sustenance will always continue is indicative of the fact that he has been deprived of spiritual sustenance. For when one continues to receive a share from spiritual sustenance, the journey of his intellectual development too will continue.

A Russian King of Old

The commandments of Islam, as laid down in the Qur'an and expounded by the Prophet of God, are permanent in nature and Muslims are required to observe them. Although these commandments may not be subjected to any kind of curtailment or amendment, in special cases they can certainly be waived.

Vladimir I of Russia (956-1015 AD) was the first King of that country to convert from idolatry to Christianity. Many of his subjects followed his lead and the idols which had been the objects of their worship were cast into rivers. An eleventh century Christian monk, named Jacob, has recorded the details of King Vladimir's conversion to Christianity. He writes that the Russian King, having suffered a loss of faith in the polytheistic religion of his ancestors, summoned scholars of Judaism, Christianity and Islam in order to find out more about their respective religions.

According to Jacob's account, the Jewish theologians admitted, in the course of detailed discussions, that they, the Jewish people, had incurred the wrath of God and, in consequence, did not know their true abode either on earth or in heaven. Discouraged at this, Vladimir said that he had no need of such a religion.

After having the teachings of Islam explained to him by Muslim theologians, Vladimir became interested in Islam and was on the point of accepting that faith, when one fatal drawback emerged. "I am in the habit of drinking," he told the Muslim theologians, "I am ready to follow all the teachings of Islam but drinking – that, I am unable to forego." They informed him that Islam prohibited the drinking of wine and that if he was to accept Islam, he should have to give up this habit. He pleaded with them at great length to exempt him from the law forbidding wine-drinking, but the theologians could not bring themselves to agree. There the matter ended, and the Russian King refrained from entering the fold of Islam.

King Vladimir then held discussions with the Christian theologians, who proved themselves wiser and more tactful than their Muslim counterparts. Although unable to give the King complete satisfaction as to the tenets of their faith, they did agree that he would be allowed to continue drinking wine. Despite his reservations about Christianity in principle, he gave it his approval out of purely practical considerations. His adoption of the Christian faith was, as Professor Roberts puts it, "a turning-point in Russian history and culture" (*The Pelican History of the World*, by J .M. Roberts, p. 355). The future of Russia might well have lain in Islam, had it not been for a purely tactical error made by its missionaries.

The Muslim scholars who made this exposition of their religion were well-versed in the legal aspects of Islam, but appear to have been in the dark about its other aspects. With their concentration on what was lawful and unlawful, they paid scant attention to the strategy to be employed in propagating the message of Islam. This explains their failure in the case of Vladimir I.

Wine-drinking is, of course, prohibited by Islam, but it should not be forgotten that at the very

beginning, there was no such prohibition; this came at a later stage. For those who accepted Islam in the early stages of the Prophet's mission in Mecca, the teachings of the Prophet centered on the oneness of God and belief in prophethood, and it was to these tenets that Muslims were required to swear their allegiance. They were not commanded by the Prophet to give up drinking wine. In the early Mecca days, there were, therefore, some amongst the Muslims who despite their acceptance of Islam, continued the practice of drinking. It was only after they had emigrated to Medina-the final verse on prohibition having been revealed at that time- that they renounced this pernicious habit.

It is quite clear from this sequence of events that the propagation of Islam should not begin with a bald statement of the Islamic standpoint on the drinking of wine. The renunciation of this habit is not such a condition for admission to the fold of Islam that it should be laid down as a prerequisite, regardless of the circumstances. If it appears impossible for a potential convert to give up drinking at the very beginning, this problem can always be tackled at a later stage. It may be objected that this lenient attitude to drinking was acceptable only before the Quranic verse prohibiting it was revealed, and that now no further stand up to inspection, for it does not tally with the Prophet's own methods.

In the course of his own mission, the Prophet was quite flexible on certain points whenever inflexibility would have harmed the cause of Islam. There is one very good example of this in the way he dealt with the Thaqeef tribe, which hailed from Taif. In the year 9AH, they sent a delegation to Medina to announce their acceptance of Islam, with the proviso, however, that they would neither pay *Zakat* nor engage in *Jihad*. At that time injunctions both on *Zakat* and *Jihad* had been revealed in the Qur'an, yet the Prophet accepted their conditions, adding that in time they themselves would include both *Zakat* and *Jihad* in their practice of Islam.

Abu Dawud relates this incident in his *Sunah*:

"Wahab recounts how he asked Jabir about the Thaqeef at the time of their swearing allegiance. Jabir told him that the Thaqeef had imposed the condition on the Prophet of their not having to pay *Sadaqah* or participate in *Jihad*. He then heard the Prophet say that they would give *Sadaqah* and perform *Jihad* at a later stage, once they had entered the fold of Islam" (*Seerat ibn Hisham*, vol. 4, p. 56).

The commandments of Islam, as laid down in the Qur'an and expounded by the Prophet of God, are permanent in nature and Muslims are required to observe them. Although these commandments may not be subjected to any kind of curtailment or amendment, in special cases they can certainly be waived. Indeed, the need to be flexible in the imposition of Islamic "injunctions is in itself an obligation which Islam requires us to recognize.

In propagating the message of Islam, one must never lose sight of this need to avoid rigidity. It has to be accepted that the adoption of Islam by an individual or a nation is a gradual process. When one is engaged in the preaching of Islam one must recognize that gradualness can be a virtue, and should accordingly, draw up a phased programme of action. The Prophet and his companions were keenly aware of the necessity to proceed step by step towards total Islamization. By virtue of this very awareness, they were able to spread the message of Islam from one end of the world to the other. It was at a later stage that Muslims neglected this aspect of their mission, thus hindering the further spread of Islam.

No Thanks-giving

In his book, *The Cultural Side of Islam*, Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) writes of an argument which appeared many years ago in the British press on whether, in the case of fire engulfing a room, it would be more important to save a living child or to preserve a rare and beautiful masterpiece of Greek statuary, the assumption being that circumstances made it possible to save only the one or the other. "I still remember many well-known scholars, expressing the view that, given the circumstances, the statue should be saved at the cost of a human life. Their argument was that human children were born daily in tens of thousands" but that no one could reproduce that rare specimen of ancient Greek art." (pp. 3-4)

This scholarly option is an example of man's ingratitude for the blessings of the Almighty, the sole reason being that God showers His blessings on man in great abundance at all times. It is this very abundance which causes man to become blind to the uniqueness of God's bounty. If he is never truly thankful for it, it is because he has become insensible to it.

The debaters on this issue never stopped to consider what an extraordinarily rare miracle is the human child. They did not think how far more precious it was than all the specimens of art produced by man. Their sole consideration was that specimens of great art are extremely rare, whereas children are being born every minute all over the world. While the uniqueness of human art inspired their awe, the commonality of human children left them indifferent.

The greatest form of worship is the expression of human gratitude to God. Man's words of thanks should pour from within him like the gushing water of a mountain torrent, and should never be diverted by Satan, whose sole desire is to see man go astray. Satan should never be allowed to come in the way of this superior form of worship. Those who want to live in this world as grateful servants of God must be ever on the alert to thwart the nefarious designs of Satan. If they do not see through Satan's plans in time, they will never truly be God's most grateful servants.

Lust for fame the worst single danger for man

When Shidad ibn Aws was near death, he said to those around him: "What I fear most for this community is ostentation and secret desires." Sufyan Thawri explained the meaning of "secret desires". "It is to like being praised for one's good deeds," he said. The Prophet himself was asked about secret desires, and he attributed it to one who seeks knowledge because he likes the idea of people coming to sit at his feet.

(Jami' Bayan al-Ilm wa Fadhlilihi)

Rising to the Occasion

The true Muslim does not need to be punished to make him refrain from misdeeds. Faith produces a positive response to the merest hint or reminder about defaulting.

While the Battle of Qadsia was raging, Abu Mehjan Thaqafi, one of the bravest soldiers in the Muslim army found himself chained up, a prisoner in his own tent, because his Commander, Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas had been constrained to punish him for his indulgence in liquor. The Muslims were having difficulty in resisting the determined attacks of the Persians. Abu Mehjan was beside himself when he discovered that Sa'd was wounded and heard him issuing instructions to the army from a vantage point near his tent. "Alas that horses and spears should be doing battle, and I should be left out, tied up in chains." It was then that he conceived the idea of sending a message to Sa'd's wife to have his chains removed and to let him have Sa'd's horse and weapons. With the promise that if his life was spared, the moment the battle was over, he would immediately put on his chains again. She agreed to this and so Abu Mehjan was able to charge out into the battle, valiantly fighting enemy soldiers while Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas looked on in wonderment at the feats of this intrepid horseman. The Muslims finally emerged victorious, and Abu Mehjan, true to his promise, returned Sa'd's horse and sword and went back into the confinement of his tent. When Sa'd went home he remarked to his wife that it was a man – sent by God – riding on a spotted horse who had saved the day. 'If I hadn't trussed Abu Mehjan up in chains, I would have thought it was he, for only he can charge in that way!'

Sa'd's wife then told him the whole story, with the result that Abu Mehjan was promptly released from his chains and Sa'd made a pledge to him never again to punish him for drinking. For his part, Abu Mehjan Thaqafi promised never to drink again.

The true Muslim does not need to be punished to make him refrain from misdeeds. Faith produces a positive response to the merest hint or reminder about defaulting. Only one who is totally devoid of these qualities will be deaf to entreaties and insensitive to rebuke.

(124:22)

Peace and Justice for All

A political revolution can have meaning only if it is preceded by, and consistently upheld by a moral revolution. No revolution is worth the name unless it brings in its wake peace and justice for all.

During the time of his imprisonment by the British in Ahmad Nagar Fort, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru wrote his famous book, *The Discovery of India*, between the months of April and September, 1944. It is significant that the postscript he added on the 29th of December, 1945 concludes with the words:

“We are on the eve of general elections in India and these elections absorb attention. But the elections will be over soon – and then? The coming year is likely to be one of storm and trouble, of conflict and turmoil. There is going to be no peace in India or elsewhere except on the basis of freedom” (pp. 693, 694).

Approximately one and a half years after these lines were written, India did gain its Independence, and Jawahar Lal Nehru had the opportunity to govern the country single-handed till the end of his life. Those who had been closely associated with him remained in power even after his death. But that precious quality of life called ‘peace’ is further away today than ever it seemed in December, 1945. India has gained its freedom, but it has certainly not gained peace.

Changes of leadership have done little to amend this situation. Zealous leaders have too often equated a change in the status quo with betterment, progress, the weal of the common man, only to find that their aspirations have been illusory. Most often, such changes only bring new faces to the political scene, without there being any improvement, either qualitative or quantitative, in the existing state of affairs.

A political revolution can have meaning only if it is preceded by, and consistently upheld by a moral revolution. Its genuine fruits should be not changes in the wielders of power, but changes in attitudes and behaviour from the top of the bottom of the social and political hierarchy. No revolution is worth the name unless it brings in its wake peace and justice for all.

The Religion of Islam

The major religions of the world can be divided into two broad categories-the Aryan and the Semitic, with Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism in the first and Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the second. So far as their theological aspects are concerned, there is a difference between these two kinds of religions. While the Aryan religions are basically philosophy based, the Semitic religions are revelation based. The former represent the culmination of the philosophical pursuit of truth by the great minds of the world. In the quest for reality, meditation and contemplation brought these saintly souls to the conclusions which gave rise to the principal, organised religions of the eastern hemisphere.

The creeds of the semitic religions on the other hand, are based on divine revelation. That is, God chose a series of Semites to be His apostles and then imparted to them His commandments, frequently in the form of Scriptures, through His angels. These messengers were not only the bearers of divine scriptures but also their' interpreters. It was these revelations and their divinely inspired interpretations which provided the fundamentals of the Semitic religions as they exist today.

The basic difference in respect of beliefs of the Aryan and Semitic religions can be briefly described in terms of monism and monotheism respectively.

Although both traditions – monism and monotheism – have the idea of God in common, there are fundamental differences in their conceptualization of God. In the Aryan tradition, God is an all-pervasive force rather than an independent reality. Monism posits the totality of a single reality, with all the diverse phenomena of the natural world seen as different manifestations of the same reality, according to this concept, therefore, there is no real difference between the creator and the creature. Thus in monistic theorizing, the concept of an individual, personal God does not exist.

In Semitic religions, particularly in Islam, the concept of God is entirely based on monotheism. This concept can also be termed dualism, that is, the Creator and the creature, in their nature are completely different from one another. God has a real and eternal existence. As the Creator of all things, he is distinct as an entity from all that He has created. His creatures in their seemingly independent existence totally depend upon the will of God. The sole possessor of all power, God has created man to live for a specific period of time, during which he is sent into the world to be tested. It is this concept of the Creator as totally distinct from creature, which sets the Semitic religions apart from the Aryan.

The philosophy of Islam is explicitly that of monotheism. It is true that the Sufi system has, to a great extent, incorporated monistic concepts. This is in actual fact, a deviation from the original and real Islam. It is therefore held by the majority of Islamic scholars to be an incorrect interpretation, not truly representative of Islam.

Other presentations of Islam also figure in the books produced in the later period of Islam. But all of these, based as they are on personal interpretations, do not have the status of sacred books. In Islam, it is only the Qur'an and Sunnah (the Prophet's words and deeds) which enjoy the status of the only authentic sources, and it is to them that we must turn if we are to have a true appreciation of the essence of Islam.

The mainstay of Islam is its *monotheism* – *tawhid* – that is, belief in the oneness of God in the complete sense of the word. God is One. He has no partner. He created all things and has complete control over the universe. We should serve Him and submit to Him alone. In Him should we repose our hopes and to Him should we pray. Though He cannot be seen, He is so close to us that He hears and answers us when we call upon Him.

The distinctive aspect of this monotheism is that no intermediary link exists between the Creator and the creature. By remembering Him, any individual at any point in time may, quite independently, establish contact with God. There is no need for any go-between. Indeed belief in an intermediary link with God is alien to the Islamic religious system. Called *shirk* (associating others with God) it is deemed to be an unpardonable offence.

According to the Qur'an God in Islam is not a symbol, but a reality. God has not been conceived of as a kind of working hypothesis on which to found a religious system. On the contrary, God in Islam is a Personality. He has a real and independent existence. He is alive and self-sustaining, self-perpetuating. He is near us; He cares for us; He hears and sees. He has knowledge. He takes decisions. He rewards and punishes. He is the Controller and Sustainer of human history (1197).

Speaking with Sincerity

The Prophet Muhammad is reported by Abu Hurayrah as having said:

“One who sits in an excessively noisy meeting, then before leaving the meeting says: ‘Glory be to You, O Lord, and praise. I bear witness that there is no God save You. I seek Your forgiveness, and turn to you in repentance,’ will have all that passed in that meeting forgiven him by God” (*Tirmidhi, Nasai*).

But it is not just a mechanical recital of these words which will earn us God’s forgiveness. That will be forthcoming only if we utter them in all earnestness and with a keen awareness of their meaning. The sentiments they convey must be endorsed by both heart and intellect. The Prophet in this instance was describing the action of a person who stands in fear of God. We have to imagine such an individual so forgetting himself in the course of a conversation that he raises his voice in anger, quarreling quite unnecessarily with his companions. But before matters have gone too far, his conscience comes into play and he realises that he has spoken out of turn. Ashamed of having gone to extremes and offended others, he turns to God for forgiveness.

One example of the form his supplication takes is that given in the saying of the Prophet quoted above. But, in order to be effective, the words of the prayer must be uttered in their true spirit; they must be spoken with full consciousness of their inherent meaning.

One should be moved in one’s heart of hearts to offer this prayer. No mindless parrotting of the words will ever earn the forgiveness of God.